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ABSTRACT

With the rise of absolutism and determinism, conformity--the conformity generated by bureaucratized social institutions, entrenched economic and political interests, monopolized sources of information, and moral majoritarianism--has begun to pose a major threat to democratic community in America. This paper focuses on the conceptual relationships between diversity and democracy, between democracy and democratic community, and between democratic community and education. While diversity is a defining feature of a democracy, a common core of values is necessary to ensure community rather than a collection of disparate groups. Furthermore, an educational system capable of engaging the active participation of the young is vital to produce democratic citizens. Social intelligence can be developed only through responsible engagement in the school, the workplace, and all communities. In response to current calls for educational reforms aimed at promoting "excellence" in the schools, the paper recommends: (1) stemming the movement toward centralization of educational authority at the State and Federal levels, particularly with respect to the curriculum; (2) decentralizing school systems; (3) giving teachers, rather than professional administrators, the major responsibility for operating the schools; (4) developing more effective partnerships between parents and teachers; and (5) paying more respect to students as persons. (ETS)

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PLURALISM -- WITH INTELLIGENCE: A CHALLENGE TO EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

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I

In the late 60's and early 70's, during what was called the Age of the New Morality, pluralism achieved an acceptance probably unequalled in American history. Graphically illustrative was a complaint made to me by a neighbor, a high school student, about her misfortune in having been born a White Anglo Saxon Protestant, and therefore, as she put it, a "nobody."

But times have changed. Pluralism is not so fashionable in America. And the liberal and humane spirit of the New Morality, predicated on faith in human intelligence to control events, has given way to a pervasive conservatism which values instead accommodation to presumed independent realities. Thus, we are witnessing once again the rise of absolutism and determinism, exemplified by such phenomena as the intrusion of religious fundamentalism into politics and education; renewed faith in the "invisible hand" for resolving economic problems; the revival of social darwinism as a rationale for legitimizing hierarchical social arrangements; and confidence that studies of our genes, such as those done by ethologists and sociobiologists, will be able to inform our ethics and our politics.

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It is not diversity, then, it is not cultural pluralism or ethnic differences or divergent thinking which, in my view, pose a major threat to democratic community in America. Rather it is conformity -- the conformity generated by bureaucratized social institutions, entrenched economic and political interests, monopolized sources of information, and moral majoritarianism -- which is rationalized by questionable metaphysical assumptions and/or theories about the essential nature of human nature and society, such as those I just mentioned.

With that by way of introduction, I should like to consider first the conceptual relationships between diversity and democracy, between democracy and democratic community, and between democratic community and education. I shall follow up with some suggestions as to how the American ideals of freedom and equality can be more effectively realized in both the larger society and in the schools.

II

Diversity is a defining feature of a democracy. It is a source of personal and social enrichment. Without it the future holds no promise. But diversity can also lead to dead ends. There are limits to what a democratic society can tolerate by way of differences. Unless there is an

ethical center, a common core of values to which all are committed, a democratic society is simply a collection of disparate groups or individuals who happen to live within some political unit, and often in an adversary relationship. It is not a democratic community.

The ethical center of a democratic community consists of two primary values: freedom and equality. But freedom and equality are potentially competing values. If freedom is to be conceived of as simply the license to do whatever is personally desired and legal, and is uninformed by a sense of fraternity, it will undermine equality of condition. On the other hand, if equality of condition becomes an overriding social concern, it will undermine freedom of opportunity, of thought, of action. The principal task of a democratic community, then, is to ensure that freedom and equality are maintained in dynamic balance and are <u>both</u> enjoyed to a high degree. Later I shall offer some suggestions toward that end, but first something must be said about the relationship between democratic community and education.

Democracy in the sense that I am using it, as community, cannot be separated from education. A democratic social life is impossible without a <u>particular</u> kind of nurturing designed to support and extend it. And that system of nurturing must embody democratic principles, else not only will it be ineffective in sustaining a democratic social life, it will be, by definition, not education. Democracy and education, then, are not simply interrelated or interdependent; they are essentially identical.

To elaborate, as a social system democracy is designed to enable its members to solve problems through the use of their collective intelligence. In the course of contending with such problems, their intelligence is further developed and their moral sensibilities refined -- a never ending process. As opposed to a system which requires that conduct conform to pre-established rules, where no demands are made on the use of intelligence, democracy requires the use of the intelligence of all its members in determining what the rules shall be. As a consequence, a democratic society is necessarily a learning society, an educational community, and not, as radical pluralists would have it, some kind of Babel where a thousand voices are heard -- but none listened to or understood.

Just as democracy is a method of living which calls upon the collective intelligence of its members, so is education as a nurturing process. If education is to be regarded as merely a process whereby the young are to collect information, acquire mechanical skills, conform to pre-established rules, learn the "cultural heritage," etc., in a word, if education is to be regarded as merely a matter of students serving as passive recipients of that which is handed to them or demanded of them, whatever potential for intelligence they may possess will not be developed. Only insofar as the nurturing process is one which offers the young an opportunity to actively participate in the process (to think critically, for example) and to assume responsibility for their action, can it be said that education goes on. All else is some form of training or indoctrination or conditioning, not the development of intelligence, and not, therefore, a system of nurturing designed to produce democratic citizens.

III

What, it may be asked then, must a democratic, pluralistic society do to become a democratic community? And what can the schools do to ensure that students are educated rather than indoctrinated or trained or conditioned. Consider, in this regard, the following statement by John Dewey in his book, Freedom and Culture:

> The conflict [of the moral Old and New Worlds] as it concerns the democracy to which our history commits us is within our own institutions and attitudes. It can be won only by extending the application of democratic methods of consultation, persuasion, negotiation, communication, cooperative intelligence, in the task of making our own politics, industry, education, our culture generally, a servant and an evolving manifestation of democratic ideas. . . .
>
> If there is one conclusion to which human experience unmistakably points it is that democratic ends demand democratic methods for their realization. . . . Our first defense is to realize that democracy can be served only by the slow day by day adoption and contagious diffusion in every phase of our common life of methods that are identical with the ends to be reached. [1]

Democracy, as Dewey described it, is too little practiced in America. The stratified, hierarchical model of governance prevails in almost all of its institutions. It is characterized more by adversariness than by the spirit of cooperation. If there is "consultation," it exists usually with respect to relatively trivial matters. If there is "persuasion," it is seldom admitted. If there is "negotiation," it is often characterized by ploys designed to take advantage of the opposing party and to emerge victorious. And if there is "communication," much of it is in the form of slogans and factual distortion. Major decisions are made primarily on the

basis of power, not "cooperative intelligence." As a result, the ideals of freedom, equality, and community remain unrealized.

What Dewey called for is what I have termed "institutional democracy." [2] A number of arguments are offered against institutional democracy as an idea, on both theoretical and practical grounds. For example, claims are made that only a few are sufficiently capable of effectively exercizing authority; that most people are fearful of responsibility; or that democracy "requires too many evening," as Oscar Wilde once said in arguing against socialism.

But we need no longer speculate about such matters, at least with regard to business and industry. Ample evidence is now available to support the claims of organizational theorists like Schumacher, McGregor, Hertzberg, Thorsrud, and Herbst, that management procedures which are democratic can also be highly efficient. Numerous studies show that giving workers a voice in decision making can result in economic advantages such as increased productivity, lower absenteeism, and superior quality of product. Consider, for example, International Group Plans, an insurance company based in Washington, D.C., as described by Daniel Zwerdling:

> The system does work -- better than any other self-managed enterprise in the country, and, I would argue, better than any corporate system in America. Despite the problems and tensions at IGP, 340 rank and file workers and managers are operating a $60 million corporation -- and making a profit -- with a degree of freedom, democracy, and equality never before achieved by a major corporation in the United States. [3]

IV

While institutional democracy is by no means widespread in America, its economic and human advantages are becoming well known. And the number of business organizations moving into the participatory mode is increasing. But what about the schools? What are the schools doing these days to develop those attitudes, skills, dispositions, and understandings which make for democratic community? What are the schools doing to foster the development of intelligence and a commitment to the democratic ideals of freedom and equality? Never particularly successful in these matters, the schools, I am afraid, promise to get worse.

America is now conducting an intensive examination and reformation of its educational system. The Great Awakening, long in gestation, was brought forth in the form of a report published in April, 1983, of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Virtual clones of the report have been published by any number of commissions, both private and public. In the past year or two, practically every state in the union has made educational reform a top priority. Driving the reform movement is the fact that student academic achievement, as evidenced by test scores and other perceived standards, has been dropping for many years. In itself that is seen as bad enough. But worse still, according to the National Commission, America is "at risk" because its economic strength and competitive position in world commerce are eroding by virtue

of its inferior educational system. Now just as it was sheer nonsense to assume in 1957 that it was their superior educational system which enabled the Russians to launch Sputnik (only one year before the Americans launched Explorer), so it is sheer nonsense to believe that current American trade deficits are attributable to its educational deficits. Nonetheless, economic competition seems to be the principal driving force behind the contemporary call for "excellence" in education. Toward that end curricular mandates, particularly in science , mathematics, reading, and composition, are being issued by state departments of education; state and possibly federal tests for all grade levels are being developed; and schools along with their teachers are being held accountable for test results. Generally speaking, the American public is strongly supportive of such steps -- as, I might add, are legislators, the business community, and, sad to say, most college professors. After all, what rational person would oppose educational excellence? But many teachers are resistant, and understandably so. They feel imposed upon and robbed of their professional freedom. To illustrate, I cite an article in the New York Times about Dr. Eleanor Friedman. The article is entitled, significantly, " 'The System' Wins Out Over a Dedicated Teacher."

> Dr. Eleanor Friedman, an outstanding New York English teacher and department chair, described as a woman in perpetual motion in the classroom who proffers William Faulkner's words as if they were a gift, who takes enormous pleasure in finally teaching her slower students that they must bring a pencil with them each day, has retired at age 54. "I really thought," she said, "when I was 70 years

> old somebody would say 'You cannot teach any more' and pull me out of the school kicking and screaming. I thought that was how it would end."
>
> And why is Dr. Friedman retiring? Not because of the kids.... "It is the system that I hate. There is less and less interest in what is. They are interested in what it says on paper is." And she is tired of having to draw up lesson plans when she is most comfortable with a few leading questions scrawled on a slip of paper. And she is tired of producing pages on goals and objectives for the coming school year when her goals are quite simply to have the teacher teach and the students learn. "I am out of sync with the system. We are here for the kids. We are not here to make paper for 110 Livingston Street. And that is why I am retiring." [4]

Mrs. Friedman is not alone. Teacher burnout is a major problem in America. And although it is not simply the "system" which causes it, research does show that of all the sources of frustration facing teachers -- and there are many -- they regard the most stressful to be (1) limited opportunities to participate in making decisions in the school setting and (2) poor teacher/administrator relations.

Of course, the failure to include teachers in the formulation of educational policy and depriving them of the freedom to use their intelligence in performing their professional responsibilities are destined to be counter-productive. Not only are good teachers like Mrs. Friedman dropping out, others are being corrupted: they teach for the test, fudge test results, and spend time almost exclusively on what they will be held accountable for. And administrators in many cases encourage such action for they, too, are held accountable for measurable results.

As for the students, few educational reformers of the day seem to recognize that students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled from the fountain of knowledge. If students are not sufficiently interested in what the school offers, it is not difficult to understand in the light of contemporary social conditions. It is not difficult to understand why so many of the young are turned off by school or actively rebel against it or suffer from such severe psychological problems that they are deemed "learning disabled." And why the suicide rate of the young has risen alarmingly. Surely this is one of the worst times in American history to grow up. Single parents. . . Broken marriages. . . The loss of the extended family. . . Drugs. . . Unemployment. . . Underemployment. . . Recessions. . . Inflation. . . TV Violence. . . Crime. . . Terrorism. . . Sexual revolution . . . Child abuse. . . Threat of nuclear war. . . Loss of faith in the future.

When one adds to all that the fear, distrust, and cynicism among teachers caused by the increasing politicization of education, and when one considers the pedagogical limitations imposed by a rigid curriculum and uniform tests, it becomes quite difficult to see how anything resembling education for democratic life can be achieved in the school. Surely under these conditions, the Mrs. Friedmans of the teaching world, with their scraps of paper, their inspiring enthusiasm, and their empathy and commitment, will disappear. And when they go, any hope for "excellence," insofar as

that means an education for the development of a life of intelligence, will go with them. But perhaps all is not hopeless. If democratization of business organizations should become widespread, the climate for democratizing educational institutions would no doubt change since any major contradiction between business and education in purpose and operational style would not be tolerated. In the meantime, supporters of democratic community in the schools might join with other communitarians in contending with the more destructive aspects of the current educational reform movement and in developing those personal and social relationships which make for greater freedom and equality. I suggest, for example, working toward:

1. Stemming the movement toward the centralization of educational authority at the state and federal levels, particularly with respect to the curriculum. Mandates from a distant source destroy the cooperative spirit, make for corruption, inhibit the development of intelligence, and cause people to act stupidly;
2. Decentralizing school systems. Large school systems are costly, impersonal, and inefficient. They should be broken up into autonomous units sufficiently small to allow for the full range of participation which democracy demands;
3. Giving teachers, rather than professional administrators, the major responsibility for operating the schools. Hierarchical arrangements in the schools tend to make for imperialism, rigidity,

alienation, cynicism, and inefficiency. Consider the small school district in Westchester County, New York, where for one reason or another no principals were available when school opened in September, 1975. The district allowed the teachers in the three schools to take on supervisory responsibilities. So well did the teachers perform that the district requested permission from the New York State Department of Education to eliminate the position of principal and allow the teachers to run the schools.[5] Permission was granted and, at least up to a few years ago, the arrangement has been highly successful;[6]

4. Developing more effective partnerships between parents and teachers. The role of parents in the educational achievement of students cannot be overestimated. If parents are not willing to volunteer, at the risk of sounding inconsistent when I say this, I believe that they should be called to school duty just as they are subject to jury duty;
5. Paying more respect to students as persons. We all recognize, of course, that the role of student is different from that of the parent or teacher. But we must rid ourselves of the idea that students are raw materials to be shaped, stuffed, and processed. The habit of intelligence can be realized only by active engagement on the part of students in the educative process and in community

life. In concrete terms, that means, for example, that students should feel that the school is their home, and not a prison; that academic work makes sense to them and is not removed from their reality; that they have an opportunity to think through problems, rather than "soak" up meaningless information; that they participate to a reasonable extent in formulating the rules which govern the school; and first and foremost that their backgrounds, interests, needs and differences as individuals are respected.

V

A final word insofar as the cybernetic age relates to what I have said. No doubt it will be the case that an enlarged use of computers in the schools will provide for greater individualization of instruction and, in general, more "effective" instruction in certain respects. No doubt it will be the case that computers will add new dimensions to the ways in which knowledge is acquired, stored, employed and disseminated. And like other electronic media, and before them the printing press, computers will change the way people relate to one another and to the world at large. However, whether computers will enable the majority of us to be more creative, as some claim, remains to be seen. And whether computers will enhance our collective

wisdom is highly questionable. As history amply demonstrates, knowledge, though necessary, does not guarantee wisdom; nor does creativity necessarily eventuate in desirable ends.

Wisdom and right action are aspects of social intelligence. And social intelligence can be developed only through responsible engagement in the several communities in which we live -- the school, the work place, the larger community. Social arrangements which foster that kind of engagement are the best guarantee that the dual democratic ideals of freedom and equality will be realized.

Footnotes

1. Capricorn Books (N.Y.), 1963, pp. 175-176.

2. See "Institutional Democracy: Problems and Prospects," Educational Theory, Spring, 1979, pp. 79-85.

3. "At IGP, It's Not Business as Usual," Working Papers for a New Society, Spring, 1977, p. 81.

4. June 15, 1983, Section 2, p. 5.

5. David Vidal, "Westchester Area Ending Role of Principal," New York Times, May 18, 1976, p. 24.

6. As reported to me by a skeptical student of mine -- a principal -- who wrote to the school district.